

# Kunapipi

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Volume 21 | Issue 2

Article 10

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1999

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### Recommended Citation

Islam, Syed Manzurul, Tapan's Story, *Kunapipi*, 21(2), 1999.  
Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol21/iss2/10>

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## Tapan's Story

### Abstract

He opened his eyes with enormous effort, as if all strength had left him, as if only the sheer habit of having to open the shutters onto the world made him look up. He struck the match. Strangely, the hiss that brightened the room also took him down its flickering flame, down the spiral of memories, until he heard, from years ago, the hiss of the cobra. Contrary to what one might think, it had nothing to do with the fanged demons of nightmares; it was really an old sod, the most gentle of creatures. He was lying beside his mother that time as the cobra emerged from the dense undergrowth that surrounded the hut under the canopy of wild fig and palm trees tangled up in climbing creepers. In his childhood in that hut he always felt surrounded by the primeval green of a giant forest. Suddenly thunder and lightning made him open his eyes and he heard the hiss of the cobra amidst the pattering of rain. It went, as always, slithering as if the last thing it wanted was to disturb anyone's sleep, then past the mud hut with corrugated roof, across the plain of tall grasses, towards the great swamp. For reasons known only to himself, the old cobra never failed to keep a precise time between the waning of the moon and the cry of the jackal. He wasn't scared of the cobra, and he fell asleep in the hiss and the pattering of the rain.

SYED MANZURUL ISLAM

## Tapan's Story

He opened his eyes with enormous effort, as if all strength had left him, as if only the sheer habit of having to open the shutters onto the world made him look up. He struck the match. Strangely, the hiss that brightened the room also took him down its flickering flame, down the spiral of memories, until he heard, from years ago, the hiss of the cobra. Contrary to what one might think, it had nothing to do with the fanged demons of nightmares; it was really an old sod, the most gentle of creatures. He was lying beside his mother that time as the cobra emerged from the dense undergrowth that surrounded the hut under the canopy of wild fig and palm trees tangled up in climbing creepers. In his childhood in that hut he always felt surrounded by the primeval green of a giant forest. Suddenly thunder and lightning made him open his eyes and he heard the hiss of the cobra amidst the pattering of rain. It went, as always, slithering as if the last thing it wanted was to disturb anyone's sleep, then past the mud hut with corrugated roof, across the plain of tall grasses, towards the great swamp. For reasons known only to himself, the old cobra never failed to keep a precise time between the waning of the moon and the cry of the jackal. He wasn't scared of the cobra, and he fell asleep in the hiss and the pattering of the rain.

Only much later, when an intense desire to see the cobra made him grope under his pillow, through the folds of his mother's sari, was he scared. Nobody ever saw the cobra; all one knew of it was the hiss of his passing in the rain. When there wasn't any rain, and if the sky happened to be full of stars, one became aware of it by simply opening one's ears to the inaudible murmurs beyond the clamours of the world.

That was last night; and today it just happened. How could he have timed something like this? Perhaps he could've waited until the dark had set in on the streets. Simply avoiding the shops with neon and, while passing the lampposts, taking a little care to keep his head down and slink away like a stray cat – without so much as a meow – he could've pretended that he was invisible. Naturally he had reason enough not to be at his ease. Whenever he let himself out of doors, those goddamn eyes, though never straight, always oblique with a sideways glance, would fix him right down at the bottom of a sewer. Now it wouldn't surprise him in the least if knives were flicked at him with the murderous glint of their blades.

Caring not a thing in the world, like a mole surfacing before an owl perched on the barn, he risked the streets in broad daylight. He hadn't planned it like this; but listening to the old sailor singing from the floor above, and suddenly looking out at the light that broke through the clouds, he moved to the toll of the bell of time. He didn't take the lift to go down. He wasn't so much anxious to avoid meeting anyone so close up as he was afraid that the bloody stench might cloud his moment of clarity. Not that the stairs were free of stench as they had their share of piss and puke to rival the lift. But by taking the stairs he could use the motion of his limbs to keep his clarity from slipping away. Not bothering to change what he had on and simply carrying a rucksack, he slid down the stairs and out into the courtyard. When he left the courtyard, set his feet on the dead-end alleyway and looked ahead between rows of tall, old, mangled apartments of a bygone modernist utopia, he felt unsure of his decision. Shouldn't he have waited until it was dark? Seeing him in this broad daylight, surely they wouldn't fail to take him for someone on the run as if he were full of a guilty conscience. Of course, they would be half right: yes, making a run for it, but no guilty conscience. Luckily the alleyway was empty and dead like its godforsaken end. He hurried along to reach the frantic traffic of man and machine on the main street. Once there he hoped to get lost, but his nerves were loosing him fast in the rumbles down in his guts. He thought it was funny because he walked this way so many times but never felt like this before. He had to admit, though, that he could never shake off the dread of falling victim to a racist ambush again, and there were moments – especially lately – when he was even a little scared of being mugged. Yet he never strayed from the right side of the law; not for cutting a self-righteous pose, but simply because of the way he was. Now he was a criminal, a fugitive. Why hold it back? Say it loud, say the shame of our time – an illegal immigrant.

When he looked up on the main road to plot his direction, he hesitated a moment and felt like turning back. Before he could give it a second thought, someone had already surprised him from behind. It was Poltu Khan, the smart guy who ran a travel agency. But that was only a front; his real business was fixing the illegals. He could do anything. If you needed shady passports, bogus marriages, dodgy admissions or crooked employment, he was the man for you. He was an informer too. People said the authorities had turned a blind eye on his little scam because he paid them off in kind. Which is to say, when the authorities weren't getting anywhere with their fishing trips and they came breathing down his neck – which happened often enough – he gave them some illegal immigrants.

– *Hey, Tapan Ali, what's on your mind, man?* said Poltu Khan as if he knew his troubles.

– *Nothing really, I thought I should've brought the umbrella. It might rain.*

– *You should know better, eh. In England it always rains. But you see there are two types of people in this world: one type carries umbrella, and the other doesn't. You don't look like an umbrella-carrying type to me – am I right?*

– *Well, usually I don't. But I'm going somewhere important, and don't want to arrive with wet clothes.*

– *Is that so? Sure, if it's that important, you don't want to arrive looking like a wet dog. But take it from me, it won't rain for sometimes.*

– *Right, if you say so. I'm off then.*

– *Are you going far?*

– *I'll check out a friend in Wapping first, then on to my appointment.*

– *I'm going that way myself. Let's go.*

Now that he was on the run as an illegal, the last thing Tapan wanted was to spend time with Poltu Khan. Noticing his knowing grin, Tapan felt that Poltu Khan had figured out what he was up to. He thought, *Would the bastard grass on me?* He felt a knot in his stomach but gave nothing away. He always thought he wasn't a gambling man, staking his lot on a mere dice throw. But the unexpected meeting with Poltu Khan had made the decision for him. Now there was no turning back. It is strange how a chance happening opens an avenue on which one never dreamt of walking. From Bethnal Green Road they turned into Brick Lane. Poltu Khan offered to treat him to tea and sweets at Alauddin cafe, but Tapan declined. Between the milling crowds in the Lane they continued to walk together, Poltu Khan waving his hand to greet so many he knew, and he with his head bent to avoid any eye contact.

– *Bloody sods, Poltu Khan mumbled without betraying his usual impassive facade. Tapan pretended not to have heard him. Poltu Khan then brought out from the side pocket of his sleek, black jacket a packet of Dunhill. He offered one to Tapan, who took it with a nod of thanks, and put one between his thin, shifty lips. Lighting his with an expensive silver lighter and offering the flame to Tapan, he said:*

– *What pathetic, this lot – aren't they, Tapan Ali?*

– *I don't follow you, Mr Khan, said Tapan. Poltu Khan blew smoke pointing his nose to the sky, looked at Tapan with surprise, and said:*

– *You're an educated man, Tapan Ali, you should know how they're like. I bet they talk bad behind my back. But every time they need fixing, they run to me. I can't stand their sights, but I'm a kind man. I fix them, all right.*

Tapan just shrugged his shoulders without making it known whether he agreed or disagreed with Poltu Khan but he couldn't help thinking, *I'd like to smash your head in, you motherfucking rat.* Poltu Khan continued to greet people until, through the short passage of Osborn Street, they reached Whitechapel Road, where he was to turn left. Tapan, almost on an automatic trigger, wheeled to the right. Seeing him turn, Poltu Khan took a step in his direction, gave Tapan his business card and said:

– *You're an educated man, Tapan Ali. I'd like to help you. You know my office, don't you? Or just give me a call, eh. See you soon, right?*

– *Yeah*, Tapan mumbled under his breath and, still on edge, he moved briskly away from Poltu Khan as if he had just escaped the jaws of a born-again T-Rex. He hadn't planned where to go; throwing the butt-end of the Dunhill, on impulse he turned left into Lemau Street. The weather was still holding up and the clouds moved high in the pale, blue sky. He still had the feeling that Poltu Khan was shadowing him from behind because it was his business to know about the illegals. He looked behind but saw only a young couple walking, absorbed in each other as if merged into a single organism. He felt like a cigarette again. It had been quite a while since he gave up smoking but the tension of the moment made him accept Poltu Khan's Dunhill. He cursed himself for that fatal slip. Now he felt hooked again. He rushed into a newsagent at the corner of Lemau and Prescott Street and bought a packet of loose tobacco – his old brand, Golden Virginia – a pack of green Rizla and a box of matches. As soon as he came out of the shop, and while still walking, he rolled a cigarette. It surprised him that he hadn't lost the knack; it rolled nice and thin with tobacco equally distributed at the right consistency along its length. When he lit the cigarette it dawned on him that since he hadn't told anyone about going illegal, Poltu Khan, even if he'd suspected something, wouldn't know anything for certain. Blowing out the smoke slow and easy, he convinced himself that Poltu Khan wouldn't waste time on him; at least not yet. Feeling much calmer, he continued ahead, across Cable Street and through Dock Street, toward the river-front. At the end of Dock Street he turned right into East Smithfield, and then taking the steep stairs down, he entered St Katharine's Docks.

On a regular drab late-autumn day, during the week, the Docks never became packed with tourists, and the locals, milling among them, didn't fool themselves, as they usually do, that they were in a foreign land. He liked the Docks more than the emptiness opening the place up to a strange kind of solitude. He tried to remember if all crowded places, when empty, made him feel lonely like that. Perhaps they did, though right now he couldn't recall any because, in the anxiety of the present moment that brought him to the Docks, other places became dim in his memory. In those moments at the Docks, wandering aimlessly between water and land, and sometimes while stopping to look up at the mast of an old sailing ship, he would become aware that he wasn't alone. He would feel that perhaps, unknown to him, he had become the focus of someone else's attention, looking at him with curiosity if not repulsion. He would feel vulnerable and suddenly would rush out to find crowded places where, despite being so close to so many eyes, nobody would look at him with any particular attention.

Today the unexpected sun in the afternoon had brought out many people. It suited him fine because the last thing he wanted was to draw

attention to himself. He wandered around, mingling among the crowd, seeming to be amused like everybody else with the casual innocence of a tourist. At the approach of a small boat when the brightly painted drawbridges would go up, usually he would join the milling crowd with an air of excitement, to see it squeeze into the harbour. But today he wasn't there for the scene.

After going around the Docks a few times he went into a cafe and ordered a Cappuccino with a spongy cake. He could have sat outside, by the water with colourful boats bobbing on it and the soft sun on his face, but the eyes drove him to a secluded spot inside. When the waitress, a young woman with bright, bubbly manners, came to serve his order, he thought that she looked at him twice as if she had seen something unusual. He said to himself, *How does an illegal immigrant look like? Is he already showing tell-tell marks of a criminal type: arms elongating, forehead turning low and narrow, ears enlarging, and jaws jutting out alarmingly with large canine teeth? In other words, is he turning into an orang-utans?* Well, you couldn't entirely blame her. He knew that since he didn't look all that together, he might've given her the wrong impression. He eased himself somewhat when it occurred to him that some nosey-parker like Sir Galton wasn't measuring him up – perhaps from behind a broadsheet – with his telephoto eyes. No doubt he would've been much pleased with himself on his typical Oriental find: *By jove, he's the type. Fancy finding him right here in England!* But then, hadn't the old bugger started that goddamn cloning business in the first place? Right now how could he be certain that there weren't a whole lot of his clones carrying on with his dirty work, with the same attention for the details? Whatever one might think, he had to give it to them, for they were the scientists of immaculate induction.

Halfway through his coffee the young waitress came to ask him if everything was to his satisfaction. He thought of it as odd: in an up-market restaurant, yes, but this kind of customer service was unusual in a quick-service joint like this. When the waitress looked back at him a second time with the bounce of her permed blond hair, he felt he had had enough. Besides, the inside of the cafe was strictly non-smoking and he was dying for a fag. He left the payment for the bill on the table and hurried out.

It was late in the afternoon and the clouds, whose unexpected partings had earlier allowed the sun to slip through, were closing in fast. He moved briskly towards Tower Bridge. He rolled a fag and realized how quickly he was falling back into his old addiction. He walked along the steep wall by the river, glancing occasionally at the murky flow between the banks. While passing the sculptured *Girl with a Dolphin* leaping out from the fountain into the sky, he thought of Nilufar. He paused and leant on the wall and looked at the water slapping down below. Perhaps it was the wave harshly breaking on the wall after the passing of a large cruise-



boat that made him give into the impulse. He approached the hotel, determined to call Nilufar from the lobby. But seeing the stern looking man in uniform at the doorway, he lost his nerve. He didn't need to look at him twice to realize that he was the gatekeeper from hell for sure. He backed off with his head down, but passing the *Girl with a Dolphin*, he looked up once more. Then he headed towards Tower Bridge. Instead of climbing onto the bridge he went through the low arch of the tunnel and arrived at the promenade by the southern facade of the Tower. The promenade, lined with autumnal trees, was nearly empty. He sat on a bench, his back to the grey crenellated towers and the ominous turrets, facing the river.

Nilufar must've called him, and realizing that the phone was off the hook, she must've been around to knock on his door. Last time, a few days ago, when she stayed the night at his place, things were tense between them. He was going on about Adela and his indecision and self-pity, and she was telling him to cut the crap and to pull his socks up. Perhaps it was one of those things that couples go through after their initial mesmeric fascination with each other, when the mere thought of the other blinds one to the difficulties of sharing intimate moments together, of each other's idiosyncrasies, and one covers up the possibilities of getting annoyed in looks of reciprocal surrender. Perhaps they were already, without being aware of it, comparing each other with the memories of their past loves, and beginning to sense the other beneath the aura of fascination when they were strangers. That night they slept keeping their distance, careful of each other's moans and groans so that they wouldn't alert one to the proximity of the other, with his mind going over Adela and Tipu and the life he would soon live.

In the morning, while he was still asleep, Nilufar let herself quietly out of doors. When he got up he was relieved at not finding Nilufar next to him, not having to deal with the awkward moment of having to say something about last night. Yet, even before he made a cup of tea for himself, he became restless and phoned her up, but she wasn't in or hadn't bothered to answer. Later, when Sundar called around, he told him that Nilufar went to see a friend in Balham and would be away for few days. Between switching on/off the TV, listening to the radio, opening a book and, at night, between tossing and turning in the bed, he waited for Nilufar's call. By the afternoon of the second day his nerves were in tatters. Perhaps it was this that made him snap; not the old man singing from the floor above and the sudden appearance of the sun. He would be the first to admit that he was a bit impulsive and at times prone to nerves, but he wasn't that whimsical. Perhaps it was the lingering sensation from last night, the memories of the invisible cobra, and the murmur from the depths of the earth, of his suddenly becoming callous to the practical calculations of life, that made him take the plunge as if it had always been his destiny. Or perhaps it was something else, of which he hadn't had the



slightest clue. Otherwise, he wouldn't have made the run.

Now looking back on his decision, he knew Nilufar would be worried for him; and when she found out that he had acted so stupidly, she'd be mad. It wasn't that she was in awe of the law. Far from it. She couldn't give a damn for that kind of nonsense. When his case wasn't going well and deportation was on the cards, they talked about the option of dodging the law. But Nilufar wanted all the legal procedures and appeals to run their course before deciding on that kind of action. Besides, if it was to be done she wanted it done well. Nothing could be left to chance: weave a maze so dense, the arseholes wouldn't know what really hit them. If they were still crazy enough to look for him, they'd be sure to end up begging for an instant lobotomy. He knew that – as always – Nilufar would try to think of something. He also knew that he needn't have made the run yet because he had a week before the deportation order was to take effect. But at that moment he couldn't think straight and, almost like a zombie, had run.

Without so much as a warning, a yellow leaf unclasped its grip on the bough, and fell on his face. It would have been natural to flinch but he picked the leaf up calmly and felt its moisture in his hand. He thought of it as strange because a yellow leaf had recently been turning up in his dreams with the regularity of clockwork. He convinced himself that it wasn't an allegory of what had happened and was about to happen to him. Perhaps something else, but what? He didn't know; perhaps it wasn't even important to know. All he knew was that the dream would go through him as if he were with an old friend in a familiar garden. Up until now almost nothing had ruffled his dreams. Neither the roar of the wind nor the silence of the depths, except a yellow leaf whispering to the conch by the sea. Every time he hears the whispering leaf, he allows himself to be carried away as if by a lullaby to an unknown land. Despite the barrenness of the place, he expects his dreams to bloom as if upon his arrival the dry sand is about to receive its long awaited rain. But then when it rains the whole day, it leaves the conch full of water, right to its brim. So the whisper of the leaf turns back upon itself like the cry of Echo in the desolation of the forest. Walking in silence on the sandy shore, he sees from the distance, across a thicket of mist, a horseman galloping towards him. He has a sword, unsheathed in his armoured hand, held steady as a statue. He doesn't see the horseman's face because the visor of his jousting helmet has covered it like the dark veil of death. Unable to whisper to the conch, somewhere between himself and the horseman, the leaf floats in the air. Singular to his purpose, with his spurred feet firmly in the stirrups and pulling the reins tightly, the horseman gallops in to slice the leaf. The conch cannot mourn for the death of the leaf as it lies buried in the sand full of water. Then a sudden gust of wind brings the mutilated leaf and drops it on his naked face. The knight, his job done, turns back with the pull of the reins and disappears.

Now split into halves, the leaf caresses his face, telling him the story it would have whispered to the conch if it hadn't rained on that day. To begin with, it tells him what he had always known, that he is indeed an intruder on the land of the horseman. But so was the horseman, by a strange quirk of fate, to his land. Years ago, hadn't the horseman set sail, with a murderous conquest in his heart, for the land from where he came? Yes, even in his dreams he was puzzled by this curious symmetry: he came because the horseman went. Unlike the laborious journey of the horseman on the trails of blood, he came simply as if on a homing flight of a migratory bird. Somehow, and always, he reaches a pathway that leads him at first smoothly as if he were shooting down a slide; then he comes invariably against the horseman. As expected, he has already metamorphosed himself into the gatekeeper. He doesn't see the expression the gatekeeper bears on his face, nor does he hear him say a word. Rooted deep in his land, his bulk as stolid as a trunk, he is entirely given to his power of smell. When he attempts to sneak past, the gatekeeper smells him out, and bars his way with his bulk. Exhausted by his repeated attempts to pass, he sits down in the shadow cast by the gatekeeper, whose height matches the volume of his girth. He passes time by waiting, expecting the gatekeeper to put on a face, until he hears the rustle of feet gliding through the mist. With swaying lanterns they are carrying a coffin towards the passage that leads to the gate at the end of the mist. On a sudden spurt of impulse, he rushes towards them and asks: *What body are you carrying – is it of a migrant?* They do not answer him, they are faceless and tongueless, but they approach the archway with the rhythmic sway of their lanterns. As though he had known the approach of the body for some time, and without a word being exchanged, the gatekeeper lets it pass. Once more he hears the hooves, and when he looks back, he sees the horseman galloping towards him with an unsheathed sword in his hand. Now the hollow of the conch is not full of water, it is mourning for him, and the gatekeeper, sensing the cold of the corpse, lets him pass. Some morbid dream! But how can it be a dream? There is no enigma, no rebus, and certainly no allegory. Perhaps it is a story he likes to tell himself in quiet moments like this, and wished he'd really dreamt it.

It was getting dark and he felt the chill in his bones. He unclasped the yellow leaf and put it in his pocket, then he took a scarf from his rucksack and wrapped it around his neck. He turned the lapel up on his long coat and went back the way he came. Now he took the stairs to the bridge, heading south along the western catwalk. Strangely, he didn't feel the excitement he always felt on this bridge of tall gothic towers marooned in the skyline. Nor had he felt the slightest urge to look at the river or the city of lights on its banks. When he paused to lick the paper on his roll, a man who was leaning against the railings asked him for a light. He flinched as the man pressed on him very close. Gaining his composure

somewhat, he lit a match, first to offer him and then to light his own.

– *Much obliged*, said the man.

– *If you want to keep the box, you're welcome to it. I can get one from the station*, said Tapan.

– *Kind of you, but no. I'm going to the station myself.*

Tapan didn't care for company, especially not him, but the man had already locked onto him and was matching his steps. He was a white man, middle-aged, careless in appearance but clean. Taking a drag on his cigarette, the man said abruptly:

– *If you don't mind me asking – where are you from?*

Tapan was taken aback by the question. He wondered why the man would be asking something like this – is he on his trail? He convinced himself that this wasn't very likely because he still had a week before he turned officially illegal. Surely the authorities wouldn't waste their scarce resources on him; at least not yet. But he still was at a loss as to what to say.

– *Well, around here – from that side of the river – I mean, East London.*

– *Umh, is that so? But you don't sound Cockney to me.*

– *How does a Cockney sound then?* said Tapan with slight anger in his voice.

– *Of course, you're from East London. Malum. But don't get me wrong, I didn't want to pry into your affairs. All I wanted to know was your origin.*

– *You don't need me to tell you that, do you?*

– *You see – if I'm not mistaken – I'm also from your part of the world. Way back, during the Raj. My father was with the forces. I was born there.*

– *I don't get it. What part of the world you be talking about?*

– *Hindustan, of course.*

Tapan didn't come back on it; he let the man assume whatever he wanted to assume. Now the man wasn't asking any questions. It suited him fine; he didn't have to respond to his stupid gibber. He puffed on his roll and, turning right into Tooley Street, quickened a gear. The guy was still tagging along. After a while he started again, but this time as if he was talking to himself.

– *My father was a bandmaster. On Sundays he used to lead marches through towns, throwing his baton high in the air. Good show. Natives used to love it – pardon me, I didn't mean you. So did I. We lived in the regimental quarters in many districts. Mainly Mofussil. I was ten when – what do you call it – oh yes, Swaraj came. Rest you know, Achah, malum? Back to England. At first it was difficult. I hated Gandhi, wished him dead. That native took my country, I believed then. At least that's what my father told me. Very difficult, you know. England was a strange place. I missed the smell, the heat. But above all the rivers. Gradually, I'd forgotten about all that. Then when the Pakis started to come here – I*

*don't understand why you bother. England, a godforsaken place, if you want to know. Why leave all that sunshine and such nice places? Anyway, when the Pakis started to come – no offence, I didn't mean you – I was pissed off like everybody else. I thought you lot had what you wanted – Swaraj, I mean. Why come here to muck up things for us? Anyway, when your people started to burn all those spices – and, of course, all those fruits and vegetables in Halal shops – my old sense of smell and things I loved started to come back. Yes, the rivers. I miss them very much. You see, that's why I go to Tower Bridge, to see the river. But it's not the same, is it? It makes me more sad. Mind you, also very angry. It's a pity that I never got to know you people. In the barracks all I saw were nappy-wallahs and methar-wallahs. Those fellows came and went. Never spoke. I thought all Indians were some sort of wallahs.*

While they walked Tapan continued to smoke, occasionally gritting his teeth, but determined to keep his mouth shut. When they drew near London Bridge station the man said he lived around the corner.

*– Pity. I never knew a real Indian. If you don't mind, I'd like to know you. Any assistance, just ask,* said the man with utmost sincerity.

*– Thanks.* Tapan managed to say something at last.

*– I really mean it. Any assistance. Bill Smith the name. They call me Bombay Bill around here. Look out for me on Tower Bridge. If not, the Black Beggar round the corner. So long, my friend.*

*– Yeah,* Tapan mumbled under his breath as he turned his back on the man. He was glad to have shaken Bombay Bill off his back. He could fry in hell for all he cared. He had to admit though: the old sod was a dead nut case. Fancy churning up mother Ganges – of all places – from the bowels of the old girl Thames. What does he think he is: Serpent Vasuki, the churning of the ocean of creation? No time for all that now; he must phone Nilufar. Finding an empty phone booth, he went in and dialled the number. No answer. He tried again. Still no answer. Getting desperate, he rang Sundar. No luck there either. He thought, perhaps they were together looking for him. He didn't want to go back to his flat. That much was certain. Where could he go? Without knowing his precise destination, and almost at random, he took the northbound train. But Bombay Bill wouldn't leave him alone.